

Equine Newsletter – March 2010

BREATHE EASY

The spread of swine flu this winter highlights the need for the early diagnosis of infectious respiratory diseases so that measures can be put in place to limit the outbreak.

An equine respiratory disease diagnostic service – RespCheck – launched two years ago is proving its worth. Pioneered by Intervet / Schering-Plough Animal Health and implemented by the Animal Health Trust (AHT), RespCheck helps quickly and conveniently identify the cause of infectious respiratory problems in horses.

The service can swab for a range of diseases including equine influenza, equine herpesvirus and strangles, among others. It means potential infections can be dealt with more quickly and the spread of disease prevented with the timely implementation of quarantine and strict hygiene measures. It also provides peace of mind for horse owners by providing a quick diagnosis or ruling out a condition altogether.

More than 700 horses have been swabbed since the service was launched and infectious diseases were identified in fifteen per cent of them.

Whilst on the subject of respiratory disease, progress has been made on vets' ability to identify and treat carriers of Strangles. Endoscopy of the Guttural Pouches enables us to look inside these potential reservoirs of infection and sample the bacteria within. If we see 'chondroids' – lumps of pus often containing Strangles bacteria, we can remove them with the endoscope and also instil antibiotics into the pouches to kill any remaining infection. If the pouches look clear we can still sample the bacterial flora and send the sample to the laboratory for culture to see if any Strangles bacteria grow. The Lab can also see if there are

any fragments of 'Strangles bacterial DNA' which would indicate that the horse had been exposed to infection (although not necessarily succumbed) during the previous six months.

ITCHING, HAIR LOSS AND SCALING.

Over the past few months we have seen many ponies, horses and donkeys exhibiting one or all of these unpleasant symptoms.

Mites – these are microscopic and therefore can only be seen under a microscope! They cannot be seen with the naked eye – even with a magnifying glass. They are extremely difficult to find and only a few may cause intense irritation and reaction. They often live in the environment and crawl onto the horse via rugs, feeding buckets, and grooming kit and also from the bedding. Specific horse mites can be a nuisance but also house dust mites and storage mites can cause real irritation.

Lice – you can see these with the naked eye but you have to be patient and very observant. They look like scurf and scales, they are often brown – like the coat colour and they don't like the light so as soon as you start parting the hairs to look for them they scuttle away into more hair. Unlike scales and scurf they move!! Be patient, look in lots of different areas all over the horse and, if necessary, use a good bright light and a magnifying glass!

90 percent of itchy horses are caused by creepy crawlies. Of the remainder a few may have:-

Ringworm – this is a fungal infection which breaks the hair shafts. It may or may not be itchy but can often be scaly. It can be quite difficult to diagnose as it takes up to six weeks to grow and identify in

the laboratory – by which time the horse is significantly worse or totally better!

It can occur anywhere on the horse and the spores can survive in buildings and on wooden gates and fence posts for years.

When skin gets irritated whether it be by a parasite, a fungus, a bacteria or an allergen it itches and or goes sore, the hair breaks, falls out or is pulled out and the surface of the skin flakes and produces scales. Therefore diagnosing the cause of the problem can often be difficult as clinical signs are often non specific! Many people rush out and buy 'Louse Powder' and cover themselves, the horse, the rugs and the dog and the cat in it. These Louse Powders are often a con. The latest one shown to us by a client had cost just under ten pounds and was extract of maize with lavender oil and Australian Tea Tree oil!! The lice presumably got fat on the maize and, feeling well fed, made more lice. The oils certainly made them, the owner and the horse smell nice! Time and again frustrated owners with horses that have been itching for two to three weeks present us with these quite useless powders wondering why they haven't worked.

You need an insecticide to kill the parasites and you should treat again three weeks later to kill the baby parasites that have hatched since the first treatment. Ring us so that we can recommend a suitable insecticide!

ARE YOU EXPECTING THE PATTERN OF TINY HOOVES?

We recommend an examination of mares and foals the morning after the foaling. This is routinely done on all mares and foals at our commercial studs.

We check the foal for:-

- eye abnormalities - such as cataracts and in folding eyelids
- joint problems and angular limb deformities
- umbilical hernias
- abnormal lung sounds and heart murmurs
- retained faeces (meconium)

We sometimes give liquid paraffin to the foals especially if they are overdue colt foals to try to reduce the risk of meconium retention. High risk foals may be prescribed a course of antibiotics at this time to help to protect against bacterial infections.

We check the mare for:-

- vulval tears and other traumatic incidents in and around the area
- mastitis
- to ensure she has passed all the afterbirth as retention of some or all of this can lead to severe illness.

Twenty four hours later we can take a blood sample from the foal to ensure that it has received enough colostrum from its mother and examine it again so that it can be insured.

Foals can become ill very suddenly and deteriorate very rapidly. Never 'wait and see'. Call us immediately if you suspect a foal is 'not right'.

LAWSONIA

This is a disease of young and older foals. The bacterium concerned is thought to come from wildfowl and pigs. It causes ill thrift, weight loss, lethargy with other non specific signs such as transient diarrhoea and runny nose. We saw a surprising number of cases last year. If it is not caught early enough the foals usually die.

Diagnosis can be made via a faecal sample and a blood sample.

The bacterium concerned lives inside the cells of the gut (which is why these animals lose weight so fast) and consequently they need a specific antibiotic using a specific regime. If treated they usually recover very well. Worms also cause ill thrift and weight loss so it is important to worm pregnant and nursing mares and their foals.

WORMING

In February you should have given five days of Panacur Equine guard to deal with encysted worm larvae. Don't worry if you haven't – it is not too late to do so.

In March give the double dose of Pyratape P to kill Tapeworms.